# SLUT SHAMING PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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**Synopsis**:

The present study aimed to investigate slut shaming perceptions and experiences of college students; specifically, how gender can influences the way college students view those labeled as "sluts" through interpersonal contact, within text messages, and/or online. Gender differences were also explored in in the context of witnessing another person treated in a degrading manner, made fun of, and/or socially alienated based on perceived sexual activity.

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate slut shaming perceptions and experiences of college

students; specifically, how gender can influences the way college students view those labeled as

"sluts" through interpersonal contact, within text messages, and/or online. Gender differences

were also explored in in the context of witnessing another person treated in a degrading manner,

made fun of, and/or socially alienated based on perceived sexual activity. Observations of a

sexual double standard, intragender discrimination, and contributions towards a tolerant

environment for sexual violence were also examined. Participants (n=232) completed a web-

based survey, which included items related to perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of college

students with slut-shaming, as well as a demographic questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, *t*-tests,

and chi-square analyses were used to interpret the responses of the survey assessment. Results

indicated that more women than men observed various types and methods of slut-shaming.

While nearly half of women in the study held a neutral view of men labeled as sluts, male

participants falsely believed this label would hold a negative perception with females. In

addition, those who had been called a "slut" were more likely to identify a sexual double

standard, meaning when women are judged harshly for engaging in sexual activity and men are

praised for the same behavior.

Keywords: slut shaming, college students, gender, sexual double standard

## Slut Shaming Perceptions and Experiences among College Students

Slut shaming is a form of demeaning others based on perceived sexual activity. These actions and beliefs stem from a variety of influences, including culture, media, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and socioeconomic status (Almazan & Bain, 2015; Attwood, 2007). More often than not, women are the targets of this unique type of bullying (Miller, 2016). "Calling a girl or a woman a slut reinforces sexist norms" (Tanenbaum, 2015, p. 6). In fact, slut shaming highlights a continued sexual double standard (SDS), where women are punished for the same actual, or presumed, behaviors for which men are lauded. However, as gender and class intersect in a social context, slut shaming is not exclusive to men targeting women. To the contrary, women use the label of slut to disparage other women (Attwood, 2007). Understanding slut shaming through the lens of gender is complex and abstract because it conveys a variety of meanings and serves different purposes depending on the context. For example, Papp et al. (2015) found different activities precede being shamed depending on gender and circumstance (e.g. women are regarded as slutty based upon their style of clothes or dance versus men being labeled as slutty for flirting or having multiple sexual partners).

## Slut Shaming Theories

Two prevailing theories of slut shaming exist within the current literature; one posits that a historical SDS in combination with a double-bind scenario are the core sources of the slut shaming, while the other model supports personal agency and status within a social hierarchy as being predominantly responsible. Both theories have primarily been examined in the behaviors of young adults (Allison & Risman, 2013; Curtin, Ward, Merriweather, & Caruthers, 2011).

**Sexual Double Standard**

The presence of a SDS, especially in Western culture, has been examined in numerous studies (Allison & Risman, 2013; Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong, & Seeley, 2014; Bay-Cheng, 2015; Berntson, Hoffman, & Luff, 2014; Crawford & Popp, 2003; Curtin, Ward, Merriweather, & Caruthers, 2011; Flood, 2013; Katz & Farrow, 2000; O'Quinn, 2015; Reiss, 1960, 1964, 1967). In fact, the first large scale study investigating attitudes regarding sexual permissiveness, premarital intercourse, and the possible existence of an SDS occurred a half-century ago (Reiss, 1967). The concept of an SDS was first operationalized as a different standard of permissiveness in regard to premarital sexual activity between men and women. Subsequently, four categories of permissiveness were created: (a) abstinence (i.e., premarital sex considered wrong for both sexes); (b) a double standard (i.e., males have a greater freedom to engage in premarital sex); (c) permissiveness without affection (i.e., premarital sex is equally permitted for both sexes regardless of emotional attachment); and (d) permissiveness with affection (i.e., premarital sex is permitted for both sexes if part of a committed relationship) (Reiss, 1960, 1967). Reiss' initial conceptualization of the SDS was limited to heterosexual attitudes and asserted that a degree of affection is inherent in all sexual attitudes. Reiss (1967) also believed that variables, such as access to health resources, gender roles, progressive cultural norms, and patterns of courtship, were implicated in influencing sexual attitudes. The SDS is contemporarily characterized as women being criticized for the same sexual activity that garners praise for men. Namely, men are encouraged and commended by their peers to engage in casual sex, while women are vulnerable to societal consequences and stigma for the same participation in sex outside of a committed relationship (Armstrong et al., 2014; O'Quinn, 2015). Reiss (1960, 1964) defines two types of SDS: an orthodox double standard, which permits premarital sexual intercourse only for males, and a transitional double standard, which allows women to have

premarital intercourse if they are in love or engaged to be married. With only a few minor

exceptions, cultural expectation of complete female abstinence until marriage via orthodox

double standard is rare (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Following the publication of the first large

scale study in 1967, the literature has supported a cultural shift toward transitional double

standards allowing women more sexual freedoms than in the past. Some researchers hypothesize

that declines in traditional, overt slut shaming opens the door for more insidious, subtle methods

of behavioral regulation (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Regardless of modern cultural dynamics and

enhanced individual freedoms, sexually active women often remain evaluated as less popular by

men and women than sexually active men (Sheeran, Spears, Abraham, & Abrams, 1996). Society

imposes different sexual scripts for each gender, wherein men can pursue sex for the sake of

physical pleasure, while women are expected to only have sex within a committed romantic

relationship. In addition, women must act as a sexual gatekeeper, perpetuating the common

belief that women are the guardians of morality and that men are unable to control their

biological instincts (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Berntson et al., 2014; Crawford & Popp, 2003; Curtin et

al., 2011). Berntson et al., (2014) states, "The sexual double standard emerges from this

traditional gendering of the sexual script such that women's sexuality is circumscribed and

subject to social control, while sexual experimentation and multiple partners allow men to

symbolically display masculinity and masculine privilege" (p. 151).

Beyond the SDS, some researchers support the perpetual existence of a sexual double-

bind for women (Almazan & Bain, 2015; Bay-Cheng, 2015). This framework of control is

created when women are held to an expectation of being attractive and desirable, but must refrain

from overly sexualized behaviors. In addition, women may want to engage in recreational sexual

behavior, but are pressured to restrict those actions within the boundaries of a relationship;

hence, limiting female sexuality and the opportunity to pursue numerous intimate partners (Almazan & Bain, 2015; Bay-Cheng, 2015; Berntson et al., 2014). The double-bind has been conceptualized as a dichotomy of promiscuity and virginity, such as the Madonna/Whore complex, as well as a moral continuum from worthy to shameless and sinful (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Crawford & Popp, 2003). Regardless, a common theme in slut shaming is a perpetual characterization of the sexual behavior of women as a response to the inherent hyper-sexualized nature of men (Gavey & Zurbriggen, 2008). This form of gender stereotyping fuels the acceptance of slut shaming throughout all spectrums of society. Further, Bay-Cheng (2015) claims that women are now evaluated by both the cultural standards of morality regarding sexual activity and the principles of neoliberal sexual agency, among other feminist ideals. Thus, by modern standards, a woman cannot be too feminine, nor too feminist. The SDS denies women the same rights and freedoms that men enjoy in terms of sexuality, yet opposition and rebellion to such societal norms solicits criticism and slander. Slut walks, described as public marches protesting sexual violence and celebrating sexual empowerment, are one example of how feminist activism can generate debate and controversy over sexual agency and the different rules for each gender (Reger, 2015). While findings supporting the presence of the SDS are prominent in the literature, there is also significant evidence for an additional theory behind slut shaming that explains the counterintuitive active participation of women in this oppressive behavior.

**Social Class and Agency**

Some researchers posit that women actively engage in slut shaming to maintain and enforce status within the hierarchy of social class (Almazan & Bain, 2015; Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong, & Seeley, 2014; Mavin, Grandy, & Williams, 2014). Such conduct has been coined *female misogyny* and *intragender competition*, and this behavior serves to keep individuals in

their respective positions on the traditional sexual and social hierarchy (Mavin et al., 2014).

Women who identify with a higher socioeconomic status, or social class, may use slut shaming

to distance themselves from women deemed to be in a lower class; therefore, valuing class over

gender (Vaillancourt & Sharma, 2011). Additionally, the characteristics of the specific class in

which a woman belongs largely determine the amount of sexual agency she is ascribed.

Henceforth, it is not uncommon for women to participate in slut shaming to maintain class

boundaries that afford them some degree of sexual agency and advantages over other members

of their gender (Almazan & Bain, 2015). According to this perception of slut shaming, one's

status on a social class hierarchy is the primary motivator for engaging in these behaviors, as

women that hold a higher position on the hierarchy are ascribed more sexual freedom and fewer

consequences for participating in casual sexual activity than women lower on the hierarchy.

Following the tenets of this theory, the definitions of slutty behavior will vary depending on

class, with a high-status definition of sluts including femininity and sophistication, and a low-

status description of sluts characterized by a resentment of material wealth, availability for

meaningless sex, and a bitchy demeanor (Armstrong et al., 2014; O'Quinn, 2015). Armstrong et

al. (2014) go on to highlight three approaches to slut shaming that maintain status as the central

component. Defensive othering, outlined by Schwalbe et al. (2000), is demonstrated by

redirecting stigma toward others with the goal of maintaining and protecting current social status

which, in turn, provides an explanation for the active involvement of women in slut shaming

behaviors. Eder et al. (1995) describe the phenomenon of *doing gender*, which suggests that

women are relegated to a lower status when they fail to uphold or perform what is within the

acceptable boundaries of femininity. This approach to slut shaming also explains how gender

roles are reinforced in young males, who will perform masculine behaviors to avoid being

labeled with an undesirable term (e.g. fag, queer). Lamont (1992) makes the argument that moral

boundaries and social class are the main components that influence slut shaming behaviors.

Individuals holding a higher social status reinforce the beliefs that lower status individuals are

poor and lack morality; reciprocally, individuals in a lower social status reinforce beliefs that

high status individuals are rich and lack decency. Each explanation of slut shaming behaviors has

supporting evidence and its own merit, which further emphasizes the complexities of slut

shaming behaviors as well as the possible motives for why individuals choose to engage in them.

**Prevalence of Slut Shaming**

Research regarding slut shaming, and its prevalence, is multifarious due to multiple

factors, including strong social desirability bias from both the victim and the perpetrator of the

shaming, as well as varied definitions and meaning of terms related to sexuality (Crawford &

Popp, 2003; Hess, Menegatos, & Savage, 2015). Slut shaming beliefs can manifest themselves in

reactions to behaviors or in relationship to specific parameters. The majority of empirical support

for slut shaming resides in ethnographic and attitudinal studies, which may serve to offset

components of social desirability while expanding the definition and meaning of sexuality and

behavior (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Flood, 2013). Additionally, while the majority of research on

slut shaming focuses on college student populations, significant research exists regarding the

prevalence and impact of the SDS and slut shaming across all facets of society (Crawford &

Popp, 2003).

Within U.S. culture, the manifestations of a SDS and slut shaming have been consistently

observed in adolescent populations. Eder, Evans, and Parker (1995) found that middle school

girls were labeled negatively for any appearance of sexuality, including clothing and make up;

furthermore, teenage girls were called sluts, whores, or bitches for any direct behavior expressing

sexuality. The undertones of slut shaming can even be found in outdated information provided within sex education courses that take place in schools (Crawford & Popp, 2003). The presence of slut shaming behaviors in adolescents highlights the complexity of the diffusion of sexuality and values regarding sexual behavior into society and culture.

With newfound autonomy and decreased oversight, it is no surprise that sexual behavior is a common research interest with college populations. With respect to slut shaming, Allison and Risman (2013) report that many college populations describe sexuality according to the SDS, with men endorsing a SDS and women upholding a feminist perspective. Accordingly, Moffat (1989) found that the majority of college students believe in a SDS, as well as the dichotomous view of women as good or slutty. In a 2014 study, Berntson et al. found that 41% of college students surveyed reported having a one night stand, which supports an increase in casual sexual activity as compared with prior studies conducted on SDS and slut shaming. Sprecher and Hatfield (1996) explored cross-cultural implications of the SDS with college students and found that Russian students had stronger belief in a SDS than U.S. or Japanese students. Additionally, they found that a greater proportion of male U.S. students endorsed the SDS than female students as compared to Russian and Japanese students. Slut shaming has also been found to be more prevalent in marginalized populations. Such prevalence highlights socioeconomic status as an important component of slut shaming due to its relevance in relation to lack of resources and power distribution. Specifically, Bay-Cheng (2015) points out that those in lower social classes have less agency and fewer resources to alter their position on class hierarchies. A 2003 publication examined 30 peer-reviewed studies using five different methodologies, including quantitative and qualitative designs. Overall, they found strong evidence for the existence of a SDS over two decades from adolescents to adults (Crawford &

Popp, 2003). Also, while the majority of research on slut shaming occurs in regard to female experiences, Flood (2013) reports that, to a lesser extent, slut shaming exists for the perceived or actual behavior of males.

The overall prevalence of slut shaming behaviors in men and women, and from adolescence to adulthood serves to highlight the breadth of this issue. Furthermore, the developmental stage of individuals who are most prone to be affected by slut shaming puts them at a higher risk for negative psychological outcomes.

**Effects of Slut Shaming**

Continued research along with further awareness and exploration of slut shaming is encouraged and warranted due to its substantial negative impact on individuals, presence as a facet of young adult culture, and threat to egalitarian rights for all genders.

Slut shaming has been associated with multiple negative psychological outcomes including depression, feelings of shame and humiliation, loss of friendships, and general alienation (Åslund et al., 2007; Kitzinger, 1995). For example, college women often experience the majority of emotional, physical, and social risks and consequences for perceived or actual participation in casual sexual behavior, men may only experience negative social and emotional consequences for not engaging in the same behaviors (Hess, Menegatos, & Savage, 2015). The result for the victim of repeated shaming, insult, and humiliation may manifest in pathological shame as well as depressive symptoms (Åslund et al., 2007). Slut shaming behaviors may encourage women to objectify themselves as victims of sexual encounters as opposed to consenting participants. More so, women who want to have sex with a partner who believes in a SDS must choose to reaffirm a harmful narrative or deny their own sexual desire in an effort to protect their reputation (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Bay-Cheng (2015) expounds upon the

negative impacts of slut shaming by contending that components of slut shaming force women into a position that fosters self-blame and derivation of self-worth exclusively from sexuality, which affects them explicit, implicit, proximal, and distal throughout development. Another risk of the proliferation of slut shaming behavior is its impact on high-risk sexual behavior. Specifically, in regard to the SDS and condom use, women who carry condoms may be negatively evaluated as slutty; thus, women are forced to choose between social desirability and safe sex (Crawford & Popp, 2003).

Almazan and Bain (2013) point out that there is a strong correlation between cultural expectations and slut shaming behaviors. Namely, the research highlights the phenomenon of slut shaming and its power are part of the culture of young people and, thus, influenced by social and political domains. While cultural shifts have made it more difficult for individuals to espouse traditional sexist attitudes toward sexuality, historical sexist views will likely remain (Almazan & Bain, 2013). Accordingly, both practitioners and researchers should acknowledge slut shaming and its impact as a facet of culture among young adults.

## Gender Differences in Slut Shaming

When considering slut-shaming perceptions and behaviors, attention must be given to the complexity of socially constructed influences such as culture, class, and gender, as well as power differentials that exist within and between these groups (Allison & Risman, 2013; Lefkowitz, Shearer, Gillen, & Espinosa-Hernandez, 2014). Historically, research has categorized individuals based on their biological sex, referencing gender in order to conduct group comparisons via social structures. Specifically, binary genders (i.e. male and female) have been the most commonly used classifications for participants in slut shaming studies (Allison & Risman, 2013; Almazan & Bain, 2015; Berntson et al., 2014; Flood, 2013; Hess, Menegatos, & Savage, 2015).

A review of the literature from the previous decade regarding slut-shaming suggests that gender differences exist in shaming behaviors and language, sexual activity, and perception of others (Allison & Risman, 2013; Almazan & Bain, 2015; Berntson et al., 2014; Flood, 2013; Hess, Menegatos, & Savage, 2015).

## Policing Behaviors and Semantics

Some researchers assert that men and women engage in slut shaming behaviors out of competition and self-interest to reinforce hierarchal social structures. Furthermore, it is not unorthodox for women to establish themselves within their own sexual hierarchies. In particular, women may focus on disparities between themselves and others through slut shaming and victim-blaming to maintain or increase their position in the social structure (Almazan & Bain, 2015; Bay-Cheng, 2015). Others researchers posit that linguistic nuances and connotations are major variables with slut shaming and how sexuality is regulated within culture (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Slut shaming as a behavior inherently represents conflict, which can be internal or external for both men and women (Berntson et al., 2014). Mavin et al., (2014) describe how such tensions can lead to intragender competition marked by microaggressions and female misogyny. Intragender microaggressions may come in the form of three themes: disassociating, suppression of opportunity, and abject appearance. Intragender microagressive behaviors may come in the form of assumptions of inferiority, manipulative behaviors, or sexual objectification (Mavin, et al., 2014). Competition within genders produces the foundation for these types of policing behaviors.

Actual, or perceived, sexual behaviors of women are policed by both men and women; however, men's behavior is only regulated by women (Flood, 2013; Sakaluk, & Milhausen, 2012). The exception occurs when women attain more power in relationships than men, which

exempts them from the same degree to scrutiny (Allison & Risman, 2013). According to Papp et al. (2015) men generally perceive slut shaming to be an act of female envy, and women view slut shaming as same-sex jealousy. Papp et al. (2015) also draws attention to gender differences in the criteria for being labeled a slut, with women having a lower standard (e.g. clothing, dancing) and men having a higher benchmark (e.g. flirting, multiple sexual partners). Policing behaviors can be exhibited through a variety of means, such as interpersonal contact and through the use of social media (O'Quinn, 2015).  Lowry et al. (2016) suggest that social learning models and online disinhibition effects may be responsible for cyber bullying behaviors, such as slut shaming and social control mechanisms from adolescents and adults. Other websites entice adolescents to participate in slut tests or ethical slut tests, which use a set of questions to evaluate individuals' level of sluttiness and compare it to average behavior of others who have completed the assessment (Attwood, 2007).

The use of language and the process of deriving meaning from communication (viz. semantics) represent a large portion of how slut-shaming behaviors are exhibited. Historically, qualitative research methodologies have been most effective in capturing linguistic nuances and variables related to sexuality. Crawford and Popp (2003) support how language is important to creating meaning by stating, "Contemporary sexual double standards are a matter of ongoing negotiation and meaning making within particular social groups" (pg. 23). Some researchers posit that the use of language to regulate women's behavior is based on male trepidation regarding sexuality and agency (Attwood, 2007). Others suggest that definitions of sluttiness are dynamic, shaped by classism, and used to bolster social status (e.g. definition of slut changing from prostitute to out-of-control) (Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong, & Seeley, 2014). Regardless of etiologies, contemporary language reflects a disparity in the perception of male

and female sexual activity. For instance, nearly 220 terms exist for sexually active women and only about 20 for men (Spender, 1980). The use of the term *male slut,* and other parallel phrases, are becoming more banal and may represent a weakening of the sexual double standard. However, male vernacular is used almost exclusively to punish abstinence or mock sexual inexperience, while the opposite holds true for women (Flood, 2013). Hess, Menegatos, and Savage (2015) point out that the language used in conversations about sexual assault and danger remove power and agency from women and transfer it in men (e.g. What did she expect being dressed like that? She was asking for it). As a result, some women engage in activism to re-claim and re-define terms that have conventionally been used to blame victims of sexual assault or leverage power against women (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). A limitation of employing linguistic analysis in the study of slut shaming is that definitions and vernacular are dynamic over time. For example, early studies on the SDS used the phrasing premarital sex, which implies that society has a common goal to establish marriage (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Shifts in cultural values, and how language is used to reinforce reality, deserve close attention in future research pertaining to slut shaming.

Gender differences are not limited to slut shaming behaviors, as they extend to sexual activity as well. Historically, female sexual activity has been judged on a dichotomy of purity versus promiscuity (Almazan & Bain, 2015). Many college women describe undergoing negative physical, emotional, and social risks for any type of sexual activity, while their male counterparts are praised for engaging in sex and admonished for inactivity (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Hess, Menegatos, & Savage, 2015). The respective consequences for each gender allow for men to embolden other men to engage in sexual activity, while women may discourage other women from engaging in the same activities (Hess, Menegatos, & Savage, 2015). Furthermore, women

are expected to be in a committed relationship prior to engaging in sexual intercourse, while men

are often not accountable to the same regulations. Further, the consequences of societal standards

even lead some women to report lower levels of physical satisfaction than men with sexual

activities and to note that pleasing their partner is the primary incentive for sexual activity (Hess,

Menegatos, & Savage, 2015).

## Hypotheses

Given the general perception of the gender typically associated with the term *slut*, we

hypothesized those who identified as female would be more likely to be called a slut, and to have

more experiences witnessing others being referred to as a slut in person, through text messages,

and online (Hypothesis 1). Further, based on trends in the literature, we expected to find that

women would have more experience than men in witnessing others being treated in a degrading

manner, mocked or bullied, and socially alienated or shunned based on perceived sexual activity

(Hypothesis 2).We also postulated there would be gender differences in how males and females

perceived those labeled as slut, with women having a more negative opinion than males

(Hypothesis 3).

Lastly, although we did not formulate a specific hypothesis regarding gender differences,

we sought to better understand college students' perceptions of the societal sexual double

standard (SDS), intragender discrimination, and contributions toward an environment that

tolerates sexual violence. However, we did anticipate that one's own familiarity with having

been called a slut would make a person more aware of these issues than someone who had not

encountered that experience (Hypothesis 4).

## Methods

**Participants**

We recruited 232 undergraduate students at a large, Southern university to participate in

this study. Their ages were 18 (34.48%), 19 (12.5%), 20 (10.34%), 21 (12.93%), 22 (4.74%), 23

(3.8%), 24 (1.72%) and 25 and older (19.40%). Most of the participants identified as female

(78.45%), while others categorized themselves as male (20.26%) and transgender (1.29%).

Given the small percentage of transgendered participants, only female and male group data were

used in this study. Participants self-identified as Caucasian (75%), African American (12.50%),

Asian (6.47%), and biracial or multiracial (6.03%). Participants indicated their sexual orientation

as heterosexual (80.17%), bisexual (6.90%), questioning (4.74%), homosexual (3.02%),

pansexual (2.16%), and asexual (0.86%), while 2.15% of the sample chose not to specify.

Additionally, participants were asked to report their current relationship status with most

signifying they were single and not dating (40.45%), or in an exclusive, committed relationship

(33.64%), while others were casually dating and not exclusive (17.27%), and some were married

(6.36%) or divorced (2.27%).

**Measures**

From a review of current academic literature, we developed a 40-item survey based on

the perceptions (11 questions), behaviors (5 questions), and experiences (10 questions) of college

students and slut-shaming, along with an additional 13 questions to gather demographic

information. Examples of perception questions include "In your opinion, females are called

"sluts" because…" and "In your opinion, males are called "sluts" because…" with participants

choosing as many as applicable from: "the way they dress, the way they dance, the amount of

sexual activity they say they have, the amount of sexual activity others say they have, the type of

sexual activity they say they have, the type of sexual activity others say they have, the number of

sexual partners they say they have, the number of sexual partners others say they have, because

they act like 'groupies' (try to get with athletes, Greeks, etc.), jealousy, they aren't liked, they are outsiders, and when they reject someone (like saying they don't want to go out with someone, etc.)" for both questions. Other perception questions related to 1) how males perceive other males 2) how females perceive other females 3) how females perceive males 4) how males perceive females, who are all called "sluts." Response choices were "negatively," "positively," or "neutral." Behavior questions included "Since becoming a college student, have you referred to someone as a 'slut' (or a similar derogatory term)?" "Since becoming a college student, have you pursued a relationship and/or sexual activity with someone who has been called a 'slut'?," and "If so, did you make your pursuits known to your friends?" All behavior questions had yes/no response options. Some experience questions examples are "To your knowledge, since you have been a college student, has anyone called you a "slut" (or a similar derogatory term)?" and "Have you witnessed others refer to someone as a "slut" (or a similar derogatory term) online?" which also had yes/no answer choices. Demographic questions were posed in relation to age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, spiritual affiliation, academic classification, relationship status, and affiliation with Greek organizations. For purposes of clarification in the study, we advised participants that the term "slut" was considered by the researchers to be a negative or derogatory label, in other words, something a person would not like to be called.

**Procedures**

Undergraduates were recruited to participate in this anonymous web-based survey study via a posting on the university's listserv. Data were collected using Qualtrics, an online survey software system (Provo, UT). The study was reviewed and approved by the university's

Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was obtained electronically from each participant prior to completing the survey.

**Statistical Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were utilized to characterize the demographics of the sample and chi-square analyses were used to examine gender differences in slut shaming perceptions, experiences, and behavior. Additionally, independent *t*-tests were applied to the data to determine a possible relationship between being called a slut and perceptions of societal concerns. All analyses were conducted with SPSS version 22.

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**Results**

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In exploring our first hypothesis, a Pearson's chi-square test was used to find an association between gender and being labeled a slut. Unexpectedly, there was not a statistically significant association between gender and being called a slut, $\chi^2$ (232) = 9.28, $p$ = .134. This finding seemed unusual given the common assumption that more women are labeled sluts than men. However, when we investigated the venue used for slut shaming and asked if the student had witnessed others being referred to as a slut, gender was a factor, as 80.2% of women were more likely to have had that experience in person $\chi^2$ (232) = 28.969, $p$ < .000. Female participants (81.8%) were more likely to observe someone being called a slut in a text $\chi^2$ (232) = 24.138, $p$ < .000 than male participants. And, 83.1% of female responders (as compared to only 15.6% of male responders) reported seeing someone being labeled a slut online $\chi^2$ (232) = 29.63, $p$ < .000.

In Hypothesis 2, a relationship between gender and forms of slut-shaming was anticipated. We expected that women would be more likely to have observed various types of slut-shaming, such as others being treated in a degrading manner, made fun of, and socially

alienated or shunned based on perceived sexual activity. Females were more likely than males to witness others being treated in a degrading manner based on his/her perceived sexual activity $\chi 2$ (232) = 9.986, $p$ = .019 and to observe others being made fun of for being a slut $\chi^2$ (232) = 13.931, $p$ = .003. There were no gender differences found in seeing others be socially alienated due to being labeled a slut.

In Hypothesis 3, we thought women would have a more negative perception of individuals labeled as sluts than men. When asked "In your opinion, how do females perceive other females who are called sluts?" 94.3% of male participants responded "negatively," which was significantly different $\chi^2$ (232) = 193.334, $p$ < .000 than the female college students in the study. Conversely, there were no statistically significant findings when we asked "How do males perceive other males who are called sluts?" These results seem to be more understandable through some qualitative responses gathered in the survey, which are displayed in Figures 1.1 and 1.2. The last gender difference discovered from this study was from our question: "In your opinion, how do females perceive males who are called sluts?" While approximately half of surveyed female college students (49.7%) gave a neutral response, most male participants (54.3%) indicated women identify male sluts in a negative manner $\chi^2$ (232) = 22.566, $p$ < .001.

Lastly, we examined the sexual double standard, within-gender discrimination, and if students believe living in a community where treating people badly because of their perceived sexual activity makes sexual violence more acceptable. We supposed there would be an association between these factors and one's own experience with having been called a slut, with those who have been called a slut being more aware of these three areas (Hypothesis 4). An independent $t$-test showed that those who had been called a slut (M=1.38 SD=.102) were more likely to identify a sexual double standard (where women are judged harshly for engaging in

sexual activity and men are praised for the same behavior) than those who had not been called a

slut (M=1.68, SD=.097). This difference was significant $t(150)=-1.941$, $p=.006$ [$r=0.1565$], but

when asked if participants agreed with the statements: "Some say it is mostly women treating

other women badly because of their perceived sexual activity and that they do this for power and

status" (79.17% of respondents agreed at various levels) and "Some say living in a community

where treating people badly because of their perceived sexual activity makes sexual violence

more acceptable," (34.38% indicated disagreement) there was no difference found between those

who had and had not experienced being called a slut.

## **Discussion**

Participants were asked about their impressions of the term *slut*. They reported their

perceptions as *strongly negative* (it is a horrible word) 22.73%, *negative* (it is insulting) 62.73%,

*neutral* (it is just a word and doesn't really mean anything) 12.27%, *positive* (it is fun and I call

my friends sluts sometimes) 1.82%, and *strongly positive* (it is great and I would proudly call

myself a slut) 0.45%. When solicited as to why a woman would be called a slut and why a man

would be labeled this way, respondents ranked potential explanations differently. For example,

79.38% of participants reported that the way a woman dresses justifies her being characterized as

a slut, while only 2.58% of responders claimed the same could be said for a man's choice in

clothing. When indicating why one would be called a slut, some responses varied greatly by

gender (see Figure 1.1), and others indicated more agreement between genders (see Figure 1.2).

The majority of participants (77.17%) reported, to the best of their knowledge, they had

not been called a slut since becoming a college student. When asked which gender the term *slut*

was typically applied to, most (90.09%) indicated female, some (8.49%) claimed an equal

number of males and females, while only a few (1.42%) specified males. Participants also

identified which gender was most often referring to someone as a slut, with proportionately

males and females (47.39%), females (40.28%), then males (12.32%) being selected.

For the 22.83% of participants who had been labeled as a slut, they reported feeling anger

(16.53%), surprise (12.42%), embarrassment (11.96%),  shame (10.59%), confusion (9.68%),

sadness (9.22%), ostracized (6.48%), and fear (2.83%), while others claimed they did not have

any feelings about it (16.44%) or believed it was "funny," "comical," or "amusing" (3.85%).

When asked what action they took after being called a slut, nearly half of the respondents

reported they did nothing (47.79%), while others told supportive friends and family (19.22%),

and others engaged in a verbal altercation with the person who had called them a slut (18.76%).

Some chose to retaliate in a different way (9.94%), have a physical altercation with the name-

caller (2.34%), or "laugh it off" (1.95%).

While gender was not a determining factor for being called a slut, it is clear that the

terminology and all of its implications are present in female culture. This study found that

women are continuously exposed to the repetitive nature of slut shaming, most often in the

virtual world of text messaging and online forums. This chronic bullying may lead to negative

self-perceptions and fear of being ostracized, even though the woman herself may not be the

target of slut shaming. Another interesting observation related to gender is the idea that males

can also be sluts, but does it carry the same negative connotation? The male participants in this

study seemed to believe that when men are labeled as a slut, it is not positive; however the

women surveyed had a more neutral response to the identification of a man as a slut. Some

respondents even claimed "there is no such thing as a male slut," when asked for further

explanation.

Those who have been slut shamed easily identified the sexual double standard that exists in today's social climate. However, they did not seem to agree as to why women would participate in slut shaming. There may very well be other theories or perhaps even more subtle nuances as to why young women engage in slut shaming that have yet to be recognized. These same participants, having experienced slut shaming firsthand, did not find that a community that is tolerant of slut shaming is more accepting of sexual violence. Perhaps, they do not see a connection between slut shaming perceptions and behaviors and sexual assault. If it is acceptable in the community to degrade someone by calling him or her a slut and treat them accordingly, at what point is the behavior unacceptable?

There are several limitations, which should be noted about this study. First, these results cannot be generalized beyond other undergraduate populations with similar demographics. Also, there may be differences among those who chose to participate in the study and those that declined the invitation. Social desirability bias may also be possible as all perceptions and behaviors were self-reported, not directly observed. In addition, the researchers developed questions based on concepts presented in current literature on slut shaming, and recognize the wording of those questions and potential responses may not fully reflect participants' opinions and comprehensive experiences. More research on slut shaming among college students is needed, as well as measures for how to better understand why and how it is done. Further investigation into these matters will ideally bring forward more effective means of intervention and prevention of slut shaming.

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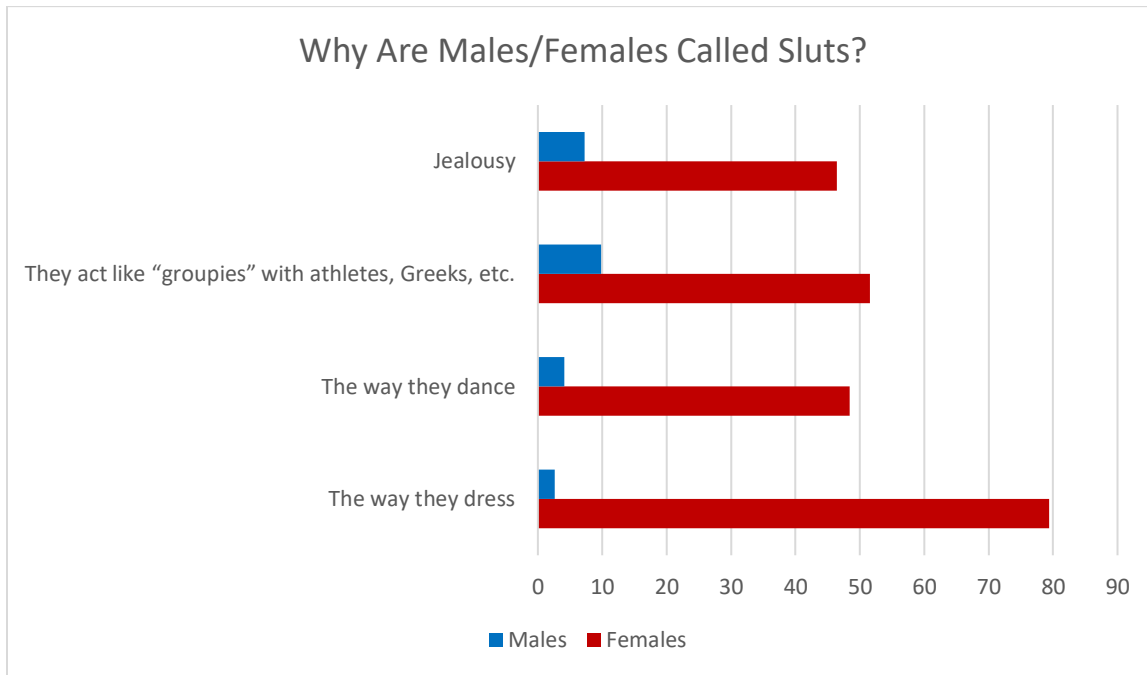Figure 1.1 Rationale for Slut Shaming with Largest Gender Differences



Figure 1.2 Rational for Slut Shaming with Smallest Gender Differences